

Grazing Bites

March 2017

Victor Shelton, NRCS State Agronomist/Grazing Specialist

Yes, it appears that we are trying to having an early spring, but I refuse to count those chicks before they hatch! Abnormally warm weather in February and early March is not that uncommon here in Indiana, unfortunately neither are late March and early April snows. The accumulated growing degree days so far this year, on average across the state, are higher than normal.

Now, it is REALLY early still, but I know how some think about ANY new green growth in the pastures. Let's think this through. Grazing too early in the spring (technically not spring yet either) does nothing but remove the solar panel the plants need to start building sugars and growing new roots. The forages really need to be able to canopy and get a good start before animals start removing that new growth otherwise production will be reduced.



*Yes, there is new green growth,
but that doesn't mean start
grazing!*

I know sometimes the hay is not the best quality. Better to supplement poor hay and keep feeding it, if available, than to start grazing too early...now I say that somewhat tongue in cheek. Sometimes you want to set the stand back a bit to remove some competition. Such would be the case where you have frost seeded clover into the field. This would only be a factor if it was not grazed down tighter at the end of the previous grazing season or as dormant stockpiled forage. If it was grazed down close before, especially if grazed down before going dormant last fall, then you don't want to graze it close again, just utilize it in the normal rotation.

Fields that were grazed down tight last fall or over winter as stockpiled forage will not have adequate amount of standing dry matter, i.e., fiber available, and will for sure not be the best fields to start grazing early anyway. Those fields will lack sufficient fiber to go with all the washy high water, high protein forage that will come on with first growth. All ruminant livestock need to balance the carbon nitrogen ratio in their rumen to maintain that mat. If they don't then they will not perform the way we want them to, i.e., less gain, less milk production. It just goes through them faster than they can effectively utilize it...you know what means, I've said it several times...don't stand too close behind those cows!

If you would look at the manure consistency during that time period, it is probably very thin, almost watery, not that pudding consistency that is ideal for the rumen. Fields that do not have adequate dry matter to go along with that lush new growth will need to be supplemented to keep the animals in balance. This is a good time period to put out some low quality hay, baled corn stalks or even straw; if they need it, they will eat it.

I would hope you have been able to keep at least one or two fields with some stockpiled forage for early spring use. Stockpiled forages left from the previous season mixed with that new growth grass makes for a nicely balanced sward for grazing in the spring and a really nice place to calve. No or minimal mud, and good quality balanced forage to eat. If you have never tried it, you will wonder why you hadn't after doing it.

This is one normally one of my favorite times of the year to build fence. We often get nice breaks in the weather, so not too hot or cold and soil conditions are usually very good for pounding posts. If you are in the early stages of doing some divisions and want to keep some flexibility, then utilize longer linear

fences dividing bigger areas into longer narrower fields which can be easily subdivided down with temporary fence into whatever size is needed or cut for hay if that is what you want or need to do.

Now is a good time to get those soil tests done. Of course, if you haven't taken any for a while, then it is even a better time. They will pull pretty easy right now and you should have plenty of time to get them sent in and get results back in time to apply any needed nutrients before the real growing season.

It is extremely difficult to maintain a stand of quality forages that will produce quality, nutritious feed without adequate soil fertility levels. Everyone has tried it, but you soon see that by "getting by" with lower levels of nutrients, especially phosphorus and potassium, you are just that, "getting by", but with lower yields, lower quality forages, and lower carrying capacities. Just like an annual field crop, your forage crop needs to be fertilized and managed. Once the field is to moderate or better levels of fertility it is easy to maintain it there if it is only used for grazing. Any mechanical removal removes nutrients that will have to be replaced. Graze as much as you can and hay as little as you can, especially land that is hard to get fertilizer equipment on.

Nothing affects availability of nutrients more than calcium. It is one element that I'm not sure you really could ever over apply and certainly one of the best first dollars spent! Calcium and its relationship or ratio with magnesium, have a major impact on the forages ability to extract nutrients from the soil and certainly the acidity or alkalinity of the soil which can certainly dictate what will or can grow there. I would shoot for at least a 4:1 ratio of calcium to magnesium, or 5:1 if a dairy. If you are really short on calcium and start fixing that problem then you might find out that other elements start becoming more readily available. I've seen available phosphorus almost double after lime was applied or especially high cal lime. If total phosphorus is a lot higher than available phosphorus on a basic soil test, then calcium is normally not adequate.

Now, if you are going to be taking an early cutting of hay off a field, then putting most or all of your fertilizer on early spring is not too bad an idea; especially any nitrogen. If the application is on pasture, then you may want to rethink that just a little. There is no use adding fuel to the fire adding a lot of nitrogen to that spring growth spurt, you are much better off to wait and do at least a split application. Put on half of it in mid-June toward the end of the spring spurt and the other half on early fall to help that great fall growth period. That June application often will help you keep things going through the summer better...especially with some timely rains...if that is possible.

Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference (SIGC) – March 8, 2017, Crane, IN – Speakers include Darin Williams, Joshua Dukart, and Teddy Gentry. For more information contact the Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation office at 812-254-4780, Ext 3, email Toni Allison dc.swcd@daviess.org, or visit <http://www.daviesscoswcd.org/index.php/sigc> or <https://www.facebook.com/SouthernIndianaGrazingConference>

Grazing 102 – June 23-24, 2017, Dubois, IN, more information later.

Indiana Forage Tours – Late July 2017 - Sites TBD in Southern Indiana, more information later.

More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>